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THE GAME OF GO: A CHINESE WAY OF SEEING THE WORLD

by
Elisabeth Papineau

Elisabeth has a master's degree in Art History and a doctorate in Anthropology. She is currently teaching Chinese Culture in the Anthropology Department and the Center for East-Asian Studies of Université de Montréal, and is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institut National de Recherche Scientifique (INRS-Culture).

Introduction

Weiqi is better known in the West under its Japanese name of game of go. Indeed the Japanese are often **wrongly** credited with its invention. It is true that on its official introduction in Japan, in the 8th century, weiqi was given the highest consideration, first by courtiers and courtesans, then by the bourgeoisie, before becoming popular with the population at large. These circumstances allowed the strategy and the organizational aspects of the game to be refined to the point where the Japanese were able to claim supremacy.

Weiqi in China has not benefited from such constant support from the authorities, and, historically, it did not become as widespread among the common people as in Japan. Nevertheless, since the Cultural Revolution, the growth of leisure and the political will to make the game the **symbol** of a certain Chinese prestige, have contributed to a remarkable renaissance in its practice. East Asia is estimated to have a total of 50 million weiqi players, 10 million in Japan, and 8 million in Korea (where the game is known as baduk). No estimate has, to our knowledge, been made of the number of Chinese players, but observers believe that the numbers are growing constantly, perhaps precisely because of the prestige associated with weiqi. We will therefore, in this article, deal with this growth, as well as with status and the meaning of play in contemporary Chinese society.

Games are eloquent... Sociologists and anthropologists have sought since the beginning of the century to extrapolate more or less successfully on the identity of various societies, on the basis of the games they play. In his work of synthesis on games, Roger Caillois states the following:

"Along with music, calligraphy and painting, the Chinese place the game of draughts and the game of chess among the four disciplines that a learned man must practice. They believe that these games train the intellect to take pleasure in the multiple answers, combinations and surprises which spring forth continuously from constantly new situations. Aggression is said to be calmed, while the

soul learns serenity, harmony, and the joy of contemplating possibilities. Without any doubt, this is a mark of civilization [...]. Societies which are full of hustle and bustle, whether they be Australian, American or African, are societies which are also dominated by the mask and by possession, which is to say by mimicry and the ilinx: conversely, the Incas, the Assyrians, the Chinese and the Romans present ordered societies, with offices and careers, with codes and scales, with controlled and hierarchical privileges, where competition and chance, which is to say in this context, merit and birth, appear as the primary and complementary elements of social interplay."

It no longer seems possible to us nowadays to unilaterally restrict the Chinese world to stereotypes and marks of civilization such as wisdom, serenity and contemplation. In the case of China there are two games which have been "*simultaneously favored*" for a number of years, and these two games, which are **popular** in the both meanings of "*well-known*" and "*widely practiced*", are weiqi and mah-jong (or majiang). In describing the world of mah-jong in a previous article, we sought to show a frivolous, noisy and irreverent facet of China, which puts paid to certain clichés. The game of mah-jong, with its insolent and unbridled character, relates to Dionysiac qualities (what Caillois called paidia). The game of weiqi, which is calm and reflective, seems to reflect the attributes which Nietzsche called Apollonian (and Caillois ludus). It is a depiction of this latter game which we seek to make in this article, while specifying that it represents only one facet of China at play.

Foundation myths

In China, of the four noble pastimes of the lute, chess, calligraphy and painting, weiqi is said to be the most **difficult** to apprehend, to understand, and to master... The lute, calligraphy and painting are apprehended by the senses, in a fairly straightforward way; while weiqi is the most abstract of these four arts. It is a representation of Chinese cosmology, the harnessing of energies, a quest for harmony of the complementary principles.

The struggle between the white and black stones is played out on a surface with 19 horizontal and 19 vertical lines (chessboard, weiqipan or goban in Japanese), the intersections of which form the 361 places on which, in turn, the two adversaries place their stones, in order to seize spaces.

Although, in contrast with xiangqi (Chinese chess, which much more closely resembles the Western game of chess, and which is widely played in China), there is no hierarchy or difference in value between the pieces and the spaces, the actual practice of the game is highly organized hierarchically. At both professional and amateur levels, there is a rigorous categorization of players in terms of grades or *duan*, and, because of the intellectual capacities and the apprenticeship it requires, weiqi belongs to the rightful line of Buddhist and Taoist "*sanctifying*" disciplines, expressed in the term *xiushen*. Professionals interviewed speak of a tension so **intense** during the game, that notions of pleasure and play are totally forgotten. The tension is all the higher because all the ancestral rivalry between Japan and China is revived at each international tournament, and because China's honor rests on the players. Victories are not individual, they are national, the individual and the ego are disdained in favor of the representation of an entity which surpasses them.

What exactly is this entity? People often speak of an esoteric expression of the Chinese soul:

"As an incarnation of ancient Chinese culture, weiqi holds profound connotations, and within the black and white world constituted by the board and its horizontal and vertical lines, is carried the gene of Chinese wisdom, is reproduced the secret code of Chinese culture".

This is why one may consider that weiqi is related to the main currents of Chinese thought, and to the **wisdom** which in Chinese is called *zhihui* (intelligence). From this point of view, there are two main hypotheses as to the invention of the game of weiqi, an accumulation of legends more or less tinged with magic about its practice, and numerous passages referring to it in the literature of all periods.

The first hypothesis is that weiqi was invented by the military strategists of the periods of the Springs and Autumns (Chunqiu, 770-476 BC) and of the Warring Kingdoms (Zhanguo, 475-221 BC),

somewhat later than the game of xiangqi, primitive versions of which are estimated to date back to the Zhou dynasty (11th to 7th centuries BC). The first written mention of weiqi is indeed found in the in one of the Chinese Classics, the Zuo zhuan, which dates back to the 5th century BC. Moreover, some historians of the Tang dynasty (618-917) are said to have voiced this idea as to the similarity of the concepts employed by the strategists of the Warring Kingdoms and by the weiqi masters: *"weiqi proceeds from the path of harassment, feint, combat and camouflage"*.

Mengzi, for his part, gives us to understand that weiqi is even **older** since he mentions Yiqiui as being a weiqi grand master at the time of the Warring Kingdoms, which is attested to by all the contemporary historians of the game. Moreover, the expression he uses, *"master"* - literally *"the best"*- implies terms of comparison and an established system of tournaments and apprenticeship which rule out too recent origins.

The principles of The Art of War, attributed to Sun Wu, better known under the name of Sunzi, are also related to the practice of weiqi; on the level of structure, the black stones confront the white on a restricted terrain which is closely contested and has vital points; in practice, the balance and direction of the forces engaged are carried out according to a strategy which is not immutable, and while **trickery** is allowed, and strategy essential, there is a moral code which must be obeyed: *"Do not cut off an enemy in retreat", "An army surrounded must be left a way out", "Do not push to the limit an army at bay"*... What is valid for the defense of the country applies also to goban.

Numerous authors of chess manuals down the centuries were to refer to Sunzi's Art of War to clarify the tactics and subtleties of the game, and to comment on the games already played. During the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), Huan Tan wrote: *"In our day there is the game of weiqi, which can also be called the art of war"*.

More recently Boorman has established the relationship between the tactics used by Mao during the years of struggle against the Japanese and the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party), the military strategies of Sunzi and the traditional strategies of weiqi. Boorman tells us:

"It can be stated with complete certainty that there has undoubtedly been, historically, considerable interaction between the strategy of wei-ch'i and that of the wars in China".

There has certainly been interaction, since from the time of the Han, weiqi has been the favorite game of the learned and of the generals, but without it being possible to prove that the game sprang from the brains of the military at the time of the Warring Kingdoms. In fact one may conclude that weiqi was once, in its *"primitive"* form, a pastime played with stones on lines drawn in

the sand, such as there have been in all cultures in all parts of the world. It may have become more **refined** at the time of the Springs and Autumns. It may have taken on its familiar form at the time of the Warring Kingdoms, with its dynamics which recall the social dynamics of that period, when wars followed on wars. It may have become the favorite pastime of generals and soldiers, the familiar leisure activity of the military and ruling class.

The second hypothesis, much more widespread in society and literature maintains that weiqi was invented by the mythical Emperor Yao (2300 BC) in order to refine the intellectual and moral qualities of his son Danzhu. It is written in the official register of the Qin (221-207 BC) that: "*Yao invented weiqi in order to instruct his son Danzhu*".

Pernickety historians give little **credibility** to this version, which brings a mythological character into play. What matters is that it is frequently quoted in order, on the one hand, to attest to the antiquity of the origins of weiqi (5000 years!), and on the other, to emphasize its formative side and its nobility. What we should bear in mind above all is the use made of this "*legend*"... It helps to anchor the legitimacy of weiqi in a country whose system of thought and political regime sought for some time to make the game immoral. As soon as the discourse emphasizes the healthy and formative side of this art which is classified in China under the rubric of "*sport*", the people are free to practice it with the distant blessing of the mythic Emperor Yao.

An aura of nobility

This myth, which partly founds the nobility which is attributed to the game of weiqi, works hand in hand with the way in which literature reports on the game down through the ages. Literature includes the great **Chinese Classics**, and one must admit that weiqi has not always found favor in the eyes of the representatives of the great movements of Chinese thought.

Confucius (551-479 BC) himself was apparently fairly laconic on the subject; a few words on weiqi are attributed to him in his Conversations. These few words have been translated in a thousand ways and the authors who quote him have him praise or decry the practice of weiqi, according to their thesis...

Yang Guoqing suggests that the assessment which Confucius makes of the game of weiqi is not very laudatory or is, at the least, lukewarm:

"Although he did not categorically repudiate weiqi , his assessment of it is not very high and seems tinged with indifference".

This seems to correspond fairly closely to the conclusion to which lead the various translations of these words of Confucius's. According to Pierre Rickmans, one reads:

"How tedious are these people who stuff themselves all day without using their wits! Don't they even know how to play chess? That would still be better than nothing".

However, in this translation by Eulalie Steens, Confucius's words seem less **lukewarm** since it is possible to read into them an encouragement to play chess:

"The Master: What a pity to stuff oneself with food all day without ever using one's wits! Could people not play chess? That would be better than nothing."

Ma Guojun, a writer specialized in games, interprets these same words to the advantage of weiqi. He explains that even the extremely renowned personage that was Confucius was not opposed to games.

It seems in fact that Confucius quite simply did not think that weiqi could improve man in the same way as a knowledge of the Classics or of art. His subsequent disciples were later to **distance** themselves from this austerity.

Mengzi (371-285 BC), for his part, states that there are five things which are contrary to filial piety:

"The first is to fall into idleness and to entirely neglect the care of one's parents. The second is to give oneself over to the game of tablet, to the game of chess, to drinking, and to entirely neglect the care of one's parents. The third is to love wealth, to take care of one's wife and children only, and to entirely neglect the care of one's parents. The fourth is to give complete freedom to one's eyes and

ears, and to cause dishonor to one's parents. The fifth is to like to make a show of bravery, to fight and to quarrel, and thus to put one's parents in danger..."

The game is here reduced to the rank of the numerous activities which potentially endanger the cornerstone of the Confucian system that is the respect due to the father, and, indirectly, the **worship** of one's ancestors. It is not the nature of the game which is being judged, but the time it steals from family obligations. Once again therefore, one sees that the game of weiqi is far from obtaining the status of a noble occupation, which it was to obtain later in history.

This apparently radical judgement does not prevent Mengzi from valuing the game and the rigor necessary for mastering it highly enough to use it as a subject in his teachings:

" Now take yi, which is only an art of little consequence. Yet if one does not give one's whole mind to it, one will never master it, Yi Ch'iu is the best player in the whole country. Get him to teach two people to play, one of whom concentrates his mind on the game and listens only to what Yi Ch'iu has to say, while the other, though he listens, dreams of an approaching swan and wants to take up his bow and banded arrow to shoot at it. Now even though this man shares the lessons with the first, he will never be as good. Is this because he is less clever ? The answer is No ".

The perception of weiqi continues to develop. Yang states that the Han master Du Fuzi was a great practitioner of weiqi and maintains that the understanding of the principles of weiqi helps in the understanding of the principles of Confucianism.

The great master Ouyang Xiu, of the Song dynasty (960-1279) was much later to go so far as to elevate the game of weiqi to the rank of one of the six traditional teachings (liuyi, originally ritual, music, archery, driving a chariot, writing and arithmetic).

The later infatuation of some emperors for the game over history was to make possible its slow justification. The board made up of 19 by 19 lines was **officially** adopted under the Jin of the East and West (265-420) and the Dynasties of the North and the South (420-581) since this board is true to the Chinese vision of the Universe and of the Earth. Under the Tang, at a time when xiangqi was taking on its present form and the ancestor of mah-jong, yezi jiupai was taking form, even court-designated players appear, who offer their services as partners or teachers to a select clientele (qidaizhao, instituted around the year 720 by the Emperor Xuan Zong). Weiqi was to become very widespread among the elite, with high-ranking courtesans adding, to their talents as poetesses, singers, musicians and lovers, the art of playing weiqi with the nobles who summoned them.



The oral tradition, poetry and popular literature were to contribute enormously to establishing weiqi as the center piece of Chinese culture. There is a legend entitled *Lankeshan ji* ("*The story of the rotten handle mountain*") which tells of the following: under the dynasty of the Jin (265-420) the woodcutter Wang Zhi came to cut wood on the Mountain of the Caverns (Shishihan). Suddenly seeing two men engaged in playing weiqi, he sits down beside them and watches the game.

Time passes, and from time to time he eats a date. Suddenly he hears: "*Why don't you go home, look at the handle of your axe*". When he looks, he notices what is left of his **crumbling** handle and realizes that more than a hundred years have gone by. When he returns to his village, he finds that his family and friends are long buried.

There are endless versions of this story, always featuring an isolated and quiet place, and the total absorption of the players.

The powerful fascination that weiqi exerts in China over players and spectators alike, as well as its symbolic importance, are all illustrated in this story, and in several others.

Links with weiqi are also discovered in poetry, mainly in the second half of the first millennium, for two principal reasons. Firstly weiqi has become by then one of the four occupations of the nobility. In the **well-known** formula *qinqishuhua* (lute-chess-calligraphy-painting) is inferred the presence of poetry; is not the calligrapher he who gives the poem a second wind...

Secondly, there is also the simple fact that weiqi has become a recurring theme in poetry. A large number of scenes are to be found in the poetry of the Tang and Song dynasties, where weiqi is a major "*atmospheric*" element, which shows the extent to which the game truly became refined and widespread at that period. The metaphorical use or the mere mention of the game have a tone where purity and calm return as a leitmotiv... Taoist monks searching for immortality, hermits, sovereigns and poets play weiqi, often in close **harmony** with nature, and time, once again, seems suspended... As an example, this poem by Du Fu dating from 758, "*addressed to Master Min of Chiang Nin, by the care of Hsu the*

VIIIth":

*"I have not seen you, Master Min, for thirty years
I send you this letter, my tears fall slowly
Your former favorite pastimes, do you still practice them today?
Now that you are old, with whom do you share your new poems?
You loved to go to play chess by a secret ravine among bamboo
I remember your white robe when your boat floated on the lake
White-haired, still confused, inebriated I fall asleep".*

This translation mentions the word for chess: qiju. Bear in mind that it is indeed, in Du Fu's case, a question of weiqi and not of xiangqi. Although many poems refer to the game of weiqi, Du Fu remains the Tang dynasty poet who most frequently mentioned our game. He was, on the one hand, a fervent practitioner. But on the other hand, the game of weiqi was his way of expressing the **enigmatic** and constantly changing aspect of the rules which govern life, which governed his life. His philosophical detachment from the world is expressed thus: *"They say that chess brings serenity, nothing in this world can distress me".*

Harmony, abstraction, the abolition of time connected with weiqi run along the lines of the Taoist quest. When the player has played, he has reproduced the Taoist act of creation according to Laozi:

*"The Tao begets the one
The one begets the two
The two begets the three
The three produces the ten thousand beings
The ten thousand beings lean back against the Yin
And hug the Yang to their breast
Harmony is born of the immaterial breath".*

Thus the black Yang stones and the white Yin stones, borne by inspiration and intuition, answer one another to form a harmonic whole. The occupation of territories is built around the "eyes"(mu), or empty spaces surrounded by the stones, and the "*breaths of life*"(qi), spaces for potential connections between stones of the same color. This notion of **emptiness** also connects us with Laozi: *"Thirty spokes gather round a hub. But it is on its emptiness that the use of the cart depends."* As Reyssset summarizes it so well, *"... the game of go will be an invitation to share living space. For what is it about but creating together new spaces on virgin territory? Is it not a question of replacing the notion of total emptiness with that of appropriate emptiness surrounded by the fullness of stone walls?"*.

Now we will see that the aesthetic feeling which hovers over the game is also a major factor in the fascination of weiqi.

Ethics and aesthetics

Poetry has contributed to draping weiqi in an air of intrinsic nobility, has dressed it in symbolic greatness, has made it possible to emphasize its **profound** affinity with the values of Taoist harmony and Confucian humanism.

The great Chinese classical novels also all bear the mark of weiqi, where its importance is finally set in the daily lives of bourgeois and merchant families:

"Rhyming prose of the Han, short poems of the Tang, sung verse of the Song, theatre tunes of the Yuan, all declaim verses about weiqi ; The Three Kingdoms, The Pilgrimage To The West, The Dream Of The Red Pavilion, Strange Tales From The Liao Cabinet all include texts which describe weiqi."

The famous **erotic** novel Jin Ping Mei is not to be outdone, and weiqi occupies an important place in the daily lives of the protagonists, and particularly the women. The bourgeoisie of the period took over the game and its rituals to make them into a pastime that those of modest means could not afford. Here is what Giles says about this:

"Only the educated play wei-chi. In China knowledge of this difficult game puts anyone above ordinary people. The subtleties of this game are beyond the reach of the lazy, its triumph is too exquisite for the vulgar and materialistic man... The great project of wei-chi rises above them in all its fullness and beauty".

This beauty of weiqi is impalpable, it is linked to a notion of ethics where the beauty of the game resides in the mutual respect of certain rules, where the unspoken takes up more space than the rules themselves.

Zhang Yunqi lists the qualities required to excel at weiqi: the tactic of the soldier, the exactness of the mathematician, the imagination of the artist, the inspiration of the poet, the calm of the philosopher, and the greatest intelligence. But it is the requirement for wisdom or of "*philosophical calm*", as the player's main assets, which **recurs** the most frequently in the discourse about weiqi. The same author, who compares the spirit of weiqi with the Olympic spirit (is this a case of the old Chinese dream of seeing weiqi recognized as an Olympic sport?) found an equivalent of the slogan "*Faster, higher, harder*": "*More benevolent, more intelligent, more courageous*" with ren - benevolent - implying the Confucian concept of humanism. Here we see outlined the traditional Chinese virtues as incarnated by the multitude of exemplary heroes scattered over Chinese history. The parallel with the Olympic spirit goes further; just as the Olympic spirit features the peaceful competition of the body, so weiqi embodies the peaceful competition of the spirit. This is how Lin Sitong describes it:

"Weiqi is an antagonistic activity. This kind of antagonism rules out the drawn swords and bent crossbows which prevailed on ancient fields of battle, or the fists raised as in a boxing ring. During the

whole duration of the confrontation, there is no knife or gun, no blood or sweat runs, there is no smell of powder or sound of cries..."

Jacques Gernet has markedly similar things to say about the art of war, and we draw a parallel with weiqi, in order to show the non-violence of a game which nevertheless remains an enactment of confrontation:

"As in Chinese techniques of warfare, it is a case of procedures which make it possible, with the greatest economy of means, to shift the relations between the dominated and the dominant, by taking advantage of the momentary weakness of the opponent, of the unstable balance of his situation, or even by deliberately tricking him in various ways. These stratagems imply a dynamic notion of time and space and assume the idea of transitory strategic configurations, which one must know how to take advantage of at the opportune moment. Chinese thought seems to have invested itself to a large extent in this subtle apprehension of the play of forces which animate space and time and bring about future developments. [...] According to the ancient treatise on strategy by Sunzi, probably written in the 5th or 4th century BC, victory due to the force of arms alone is considered inferior, victory through diplomacy comes second, but first place goes to that made possible by the use of stratagems. The ideal is to defeat without even having to fight".

Jin Tongshi, a national level referee, and Professor of weiqi at Beijing University, also emphasizes the importance of intuition in the mastery of weiqi as in that of the arts: without a **basic** talent, studying is useless. However, without an intuition of the good and of the beautiful, intelligence is useless also. One cannot therefore avoid thinking of a "*gift*" proper to the weiqi master, and, because of this grace which he is given, the master in China is wrapped in an aura of prestige and wisdom which obviously brings him certain privileges.

It is without doubt to Kawabata, in his work "*The Master or The Go Tournament*", that the honor must be attributed of having most agreeably expressed the requirement of an aesthetic feeling, his connivance with the ethic of the game:

"The game is over, Mr Otake has spoilt it with his embedded move, as if he had smeared ink on a picture we had painted together". The master had composed his tournament like an aesthete; it seemed to him that black had just been smeared on the work, in short a work of art, at the most exciting moment. The game of Black on White, as carefully thought out as a work of creation, takes on its forms. The movement of the spirit is found in it, a harmony like that of music. All is lost when a wrong note is sounded, when one of the two musicians launches alone and without warning into an eccentric cadence. One of the adversaries, insensitive to the humors of the other, can spoil a perfect game."

Thus the connection between ethic and aesthetic: the board is a physical space which one occupies as the ink occupies the sheet of white paper, and here the beautiful is indisputably linked to the good. Exactly as in a certain kind of war in the Middle Ages, where, Cazeneuve tells us, when the adversaries considered themselves to

be equal - which must be the case in any game of weiqi, since the handicap system makes possible a **balancing** of the conditions of the game - combat resembled a tournament and a potlach. Victory is gratifying to the extent that the game has been an ambitious struggle, a fruitful exchange, a calm construction of territory, where "dignity and elegance prevail over intrigue" (Shi Dangan (1710-1770), great Qing dynasty player).

The ritual aspect

Chess, taiji, religious or political services, repetitive practices, collective and socializing, sacred because they are vital, creative because they are constantly adapting to new diktats, if only also because of the numbers involved, the **simple** practices of daily life in China all have, to the observer, the characteristics of ritual. In the case of weiqi, the ritual aspect of the game, especially during competitions, is intimately related to the ethical and aesthetic aspects we have just discussed. Is it the religious silence or the contemplation described in the legend of Shishishan, to be observed in the competitions we have witnessed, which suggest the word ritual? There are in the unfolding of a game or a tournament several of those characteristics which have been used to define ritual, among them the absorption of the players in a flow (*"holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement"*).

In a competition, playing and thinking time is very precisely measured for each player by twin clocks, and the gradual positioning of the pieces is meticulously noted by a referee. Each player is identified by a card placed on his side of the table and, when the game is over, the result is posted on the game organization chart. Official competition is obviously much more **highly** regulated than a game between friends, but in both cases the almost perfect silence, the non-intervention of observers, the absolute taboo on moving a piece already placed, are immutable rules.

In both cases, a game between friends or a competition, the game will be replayed after its end, methodically, in order for the players to benefit mutually from their mistakes and their good moves. In this ritual, one witnesses again the self-effacing of the winner in an act of creation; when the game is over it is not yet over, it gives place to the necessary synthesis. The winner takes on the role of master, and there is symbolic communication with the liminal world of weiqi in the constant and quasi sacred references which the winner and his partner make to classic *"openings"*, to the famous games of the masters, to the ancient qipu, the chess manuals, the oldest of which is said to date back to the Han dynasty. These games are so many rituals through which the player accedes to a higher level of understanding of the world of weiqi and of the world itself, stages marked in a practical way by the passing of the *"dans"*.

Moreover the Chinese Weiqi Institute, in Beijing, displays all the characteristics of a temple. It is as difficult to enter as most *"work units"*, but the same nonchalance does not predominate there. A large board dominates the right hand side of the entrance, where are related the most recent exploits of the members of the Chinese Weiqi Association. A huge calligraphy engraved in stone and a bust of Chen Yi impose their dark and massive presence in the middle of

the foyer, like a statue of Buddha on an altar. An impressive peacefulness reigns in this place: one learns weiqi by watching, by absorbing and by **playing**, and only the click of the stones on the board punctuates this muffled celebration.

The rivalry between Japan, Korea and China

There are said to be basic inter cultural differences in the very conception and finality of the game. According to Zhang Yunqi, except for the **standardization** of the game and of the rules for counting points for competition purposes, about which a consensus was reached [BGA Website](#), the very vision of the game differs among the Chinese, the Japanese and the Koreans:

"The Japanese Weiqi Institute and the Korean Weiqi Institute consider that the aim of the game consists of the encircling of territory, and that this territory represents its purpose and decides victory. The Chinese Weiqi Association, for its part, considers that the aim of the game is the occupation of territory by the pieces and the empty spaces, and that this occupation decides victory".

The Chinese are said to represent through weiqi the **primordial** and vital act of man for his survival, which consists of settling in a place in order to secure his subsistence and his reproduction. This point of view of Zhang's seems somewhat in conflict with the well-known interpretations which associate weiqi with warfare! Let us note that Zhang is contradicted by Heaulmes who explains with greater objectivity that it was in a historical (rather than a geographic!) way that the game in fact evolved in this direction:

"The early game therefore evolved naturally towards another game in which the aim was to surround larger free areas than the other player. One can easily imagine that then the initial aim (of capturing stones) may have blurred, becoming secondary, and have been completely forgotten, to the point of allowing capture as a way of making territories".

One might also think that capture has always been incidental since the first component wei of the word weiqi means to encircle, and is thus revealing of the mechanics and the intentions of the game... These theoretical subtleties, about which we would have great difficulty deciding, and in which the Chinese still claim the right to possess and to defend the truth, are not entirely foreign to the traditional rivalry between these three Asian countries (Taiwan, which established a Taiwanese weiqi Institute in February 2000, is not taken into consideration here). China is symbolically vested with the **authority** of the founder when it is a question of history or of the principles of weiqi. But the inadequacy of its players in competition (which is to be understood as competition between China, Japan and Korea) until recently undermined its prestige and supposed authority. Kawabata drove the point home with this judgement, which is widely shared in Japan and in the West:

"Go comes to us from China, but it took on its traditional form in Japan. Chinese go, nowadays as was the case three hundred years ago, does not bear comparison with ours. The elevation and also the depth of this game came to it from Japan... The Japanese sowed this store of wisdom, this "way of the three hundred and sixty one squares" which symbolized to the Chinese the principles of nature, the universe and human existence. They saw an entertainment rich in spiritual possibilities and called it the relaxation of the immortal. It

is the Japanese who sublimated the game".

In the last few years, the Chinese have had the joy of seeing Kawabata shown to be wrong . As reported by the New China news service, *"a new page in the history of weiqi was written"* on the 25th of March 1995, when the two **national champions**, Nie Weiping and Ma Xiaochun, carried off the honors for the first time in an international championship, the sixth Dongyang Zhengquan Bei tournament held in Korea. This *"historic breakthrough"* against the Japanese finalists set off a wave of emotion in the country. Our two champions were indeed used to coming in third or fourth place in that tournament. During this final victory, the Friday evening weiqi class was in progress at the University of Beijing.

Professor Jin Tongshi had arranged to be faxed the outline of the game under way between Nie Weiping and his Japanese adversary Yamashiro Hiroshi, and he was commenting it at the blackboard pointing out the various possibilities open to the two competitors. Suddenly his beeper sounded and he peered down avidly to read the figures that had appeared on the screen. Lifting his head slowly, he scanned the class with his eyes and announced superbly: Women shengli le (We have won!). He had arranged with a colleague at the Chinese Weiqi Institute (we can imagine them all, over there, **religiously** soaking up the news of the moves being faxed from Korea) to tell him the verdict by means of a code on his beeper. A wave of applause, and a palpable feeling of pride, swept over what had been a silent classroom. Sweet revenge in the heart of China, which dates the emergence of this symbol of identity, this *"venerated totem of the nation"*, back to five thousand years ago.

As is fitting, Ma Xiaochun and Nie Weiping (who had been elected a member of the sixth Consultative Political Conference of the Chinese People in 1993, and a member of the Permanent Committee of that body in 1994), were met at the airport by a delegation of **dignitaries** and players. We asked Liang Weitang, an elite player and eighth dan, if the honor of victory was above all individual or national:

"Generally, if I play inside China, I represent Guangdong; if I play abroad, I represent China, my country. The individual performances of those who represent the country are certainly assessed, but fundamentally, in international competitions, it is a question of the country's prestige".

Nationalism and collectivism

The distinction between encircling and occupying a territory, which we discussed above, lies perhaps merely in the words used, but all these discourses on the game are also important in understanding what is at stake. Historically, the Chinese consider the Japanese to be invaders and usurpers. The semantic distinctions do not speak so much of the game as of the **dynamics** of the competition between the two countries concerned. Weiqi is the ambassador of China. We know that international sports competitions are in fact the site of battle or of the representation of what is called the mental and physical capital of nations. When we use conventional phrases such as "*East German swimmers*", "*Bulgarian bodybuilders*", "*Chinese runners*" or "*American skaters*", it is because, for a time, these countries are the flag bearers of efficiency, of mastery in these sports, and this prestige reflects on the nation.

This construction of the myths of supremacy can also be seen in non-sports areas: "*Jewish musicians*", "*Russian chess players*", etc. The Chinese have had their game, weiqi, usurped by Japanese supremacy for decades, as we have seen. Hence the density of the media coverage which was given to this competition, on a level with that given to Chinese athletes who return victorious from the Olympic Games. One generally imagines that any country which can spread the **influence** of its athletes and its intellectuals is a stable country... It is in this sense that the integration of weiqi into competition, on an equal footing with other sports, must be understood as an undertaking to put on the market Chinese identity, integrity and efficiency, both nationally and internationally.

Moreover, during the official ceremony in honor of the victory, which was held at the Weiqi Institute on the 29th of May 1996, the President of the Institute, Chen Zude, himself a former national and international champion in the 1960s, expressing his congratulations to the players in these terms:

"the victory being celebrated to day is the fruit of the support and of the importance given by the State and the Party, it is also the fruit of the efforts of generations of players."

With great modesty, Nie Weiping replied:

"We will strive at each competition and seek to become diligent trainers for the next generation of players, in order that, at the heart of our Chinese Institute, the following saying will be illustrated 'The ground swell pushes the front waves of the Yangtse river'".

Since that tournament, the Chinese players have become dominant, and moreover the "*next generation*", in the opinion of all the specialists, is incredibly fearsome: not only in China, but also particularly in Korea, whose young **prodigies** seem likely to become the next threat to the Japanese players. This excitement is all the

more stimulating for the world of weiqi.

The Apollonian element: wisdom, thought, plastic art

Despite its political significance, the symbolism of weiqi is clear; the game is rooted in history, it is synonymous with beauty, dignity, intelligence, harmony and Chinese civilization. Its practice is a counterweight to the agitation of the world, and it is to weiqi that people in search of wisdom and nobility adhere.

The game is the incarnation of Chineseness, past and present, within and outside China. By its very nature and because each game resembles an artistic creation, the game of weiqi, down through history as well as in its contemporary practice, corresponds to the Apollonian qualities: it brings together the virtues of wisdom, reflexion, and aesthetics which myth attributes to China. But also, as all the players we have met have **affirmed** to us, weiqi carries the virtues of timelessness and eternity which will ensure its survival.

The creative calm of the players who watch this world coming into existence on the board, through the magic of their dialogue, is what we call Apollonian. It is the expression of a harmony between man and his environment, a harmony which Simon Leys tells us is the "*key concept of Chinese civilization*":

"Whether it is a question of organizing relations among men, or attuning the individual to the rhythms of the universe, the same preoccupation with harmony animates Confucian wisdom and Taoist mysticism".

The self-denial, the diligence and the intelligence which professional weiqi competitors have to show today, can be compared with the path that the cultivated of the past had to follow. They are indeed the mandarins of a certain kind of Chinese culture, the extinction of which we cannot imagine, despite the **increasing** influences from abroad and the strong presence of the Dionysiac in the new Chinese leisure pursuits.

Towards a greater popularity of weiqi

The policies of economic growth and modernization in the 1980s made it possible to blur certain stratifications and to put an official end to "*class struggle*". Economic growth **demands** a certain amount of privatization, free enterprise and an opening to foreign investment. These developments have had as a corollary the erosion of various traditional class markers, the rapid weakening of the work unit as a management and identity structure, and the emergence of a new urban middle class with new values.

Although the "*Mao-style*" class struggle is no longer the order of the day, another form of struggle is nevertheless taking place on the blurred frontiers of social relations; it is the struggle to obtain a symbolic and material capital which is entirely new on the Chinese market. This struggle is embodied in the jungle of the worlds of business and work but also on the periphery of production activities, on the waste ground of play and leisure which then become symbols of success.

The reduction of the working week by a half day (down to five and a half!) on the 1st of March 1994, and then by another half day on the 1st of May 1995 (the five day week) produced an increase in free time and a **mini revolution** in leisure habits. The diversification, westernization and computerization of activities offered to the Chinese since the 1980s have really created a "*leisure market*", allowing the individual to relax "*à la carte*", but also to make his leisure activity a "*symbol of success*" and a "*status marker*" (to use Roger Sue's expressions once again). Therein lies another of the functions of play, which is fundamental in contemporary urban China.

Play activities are full of meaning. But many of them, because of their novelty in the cultural landscape, are not easily classifiable on the scale of "*symbolic capital*" (billiards, electronic games, disco, golf, etc.). Using the example of photography, Bourdieu has explained how the appropriation of a cultural practice by several different classes is also **possible**, according to the different meanings conferred on such activities by their practitioners. In the Chinese context, the clientele of various games is itself in the process of being redefined in terms of status, in a society where the social scales and hierarchies are out of focus, and a number of games and new forms of leisure are in the process of being assigned status, if not legitimacy.

Weiqi, as we have seen, is synonymous with beauty, dignity, intelligence, harmony and Chineseness. But the representatives of the elite are not longer its only players, and the game is becoming the vehicle for two kinds of experience: there is the inner pleasure and the communion with tradition of the weiqi professionals, which obviously remains the **primary** factor in the durability of the game.

But we are also witnessing the use of the game as an expression of the symbolic aspirations of new players.

We have observed and filmed, in the annex of the National Weiqi Institute which is set aside for non-professionals, the intense activity of the players at amateur level, who nonetheless have the privilege of gaining access to this temple of weiqi. Their admission to this place is due, according to Liang Weitang, partly to their talent, but above all because of their connections. The existence of these premises, however, bears witness to the "*democratization*" of weiqi, just as the televised lessons which are now broadcast allow one to think that it acquiring a more popular character. Of course, weiqi remains a game for "*intellectuals*"; but urban schoolchildren are more and more frequently being taught its **rudiments**, in private classes under parental pressure. Moreover, we have observed a striking number of private traders playing weiqi in front of their stalls, between sales, despite the fact that the game demands sustained concentration.

The merchant class still suffers from ostracism to some extent, as it has all during history; weiqi remains the expression of the possession of "*cultural capital*", as golf is the expression of the possession of substantial "*economic capital*", the former therefore also attracts this rising middle class in search of respectability. Did not Kraus tell us, on the subject of the lute, that other symbol of a noble China:

"Many wealthy Chinese who could not play the 'qin' would hang one on the wall as a badge of status, not unlike later bourgeois displays of elegant but unplayed pianos".

We should not, therefore, worry too much, as do many Chinese analysts of the new trends in leisure, that these leisure activities are becoming impoverished, that traditions are disappearing, and that pleasures are becoming commercialized. Weiqi, as the calm **ambassador** of a nonetheless vibrant China, in a double process of democratization and refinement, seems to us likely to go on holding sway for a long time...

Footnotes

1. The origins of the game of weiqi in Korea, date back, according to John Fairbairn, to the wave of immigration led by Qizi in 109 BC. There is no evidence that he carried with him the game of weiqi, but this hypothesis remains very plausible. The first physical evidence of the existence of weiqi in Korea is a game board found in the temple of Hae-In and dated 880 AD. The present level of the professional game in Korea is extremely high and it is estimated that 40% of the population plays regularly as amateurs.
2. Roger Caillois ed., *Jeux et sports (Games and Sports)*, Paris, Gallimard (La Pléiade), 1967, pp. 167, 171-172.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *La naissance de la tragédie (The Birth of Tragedy)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977 (1st ed. 1872).
4. Duan is the Chinese pronunciation of the better-known Japanese word "dan", which represents the various minor grades in karate and judo.
5. Yang Guoqing, " Lun weiqi yu Zhongguo gudai sixiang wenhua liupai " ("Remarks on weiqi and the schools of thought in ancient China"), in *Tiyu Wenshi (Historical Review of Sports)*, n° 6, 1990, p. 56.
6. Sitong Lin, " Lun Zhongguo weiqi de minzuxing tezheng " (Remarks on the national characteristics of weiqi in China), in *Tiyu wenshi (Historical Review of Sports)*, n° 3, 1991, p. 13.
7. Pascal Reyssset *Le Go aux sources de l'avenir (Go At The Sources Of The Future)*, Paris, Chiron, 1992. p. 149.
8. More recently, Ma Xiaochun, 9th dan and world champion in 1995, wrote a work entitled *The thirty-six stratagems applied to Go*, 1990, p. 97.
9. Scott A. Boorman, *Go et Mao; pour une étude de la stratégie maoïste en termes de jeu de go (Go and Mao; Towards A Maoist Strategy In Terms Of The Game Of Go)*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, p. 14.
10. See: Huang Jun, *Yiren zhuan (Stories of Chess Masters)*, Changsha, Yuelu shushe, 1985; Lin Sitong, " Lun Zhongguo weiqi de minzuxing tezheng " (Remarks On The National Characteristics Of Weiki In China), in *Tiyu wenshi*, n° .3, 1991, pp. 13-16; Ma Guojun, *Zhonghua chuantong youxi daquan (The Big Traditional Chinese Game Collection)*, Beijing, Nongcun duwu chubanshe, 1990.
11. Yang Guoqing, " Lun weiqi yu Zhongguo gudai sixiang wenhua liupai " (Remarks on weiqi and the schools of thought in ancient China), in *Tiyu Wenshi (Revue historique des sports)*, n° 6, 1990, p.

56.

12. Pierre Ryckmans, *Les entretiens de Confucius* (Conversations with Confucius), Paris, Gallimard, 1987, p. 98.

13. Eulalie Steens, *Le livre de la sagesse de Confucius* (The Book of Wisdom of Confucius), Paris, Editions du Rocher, 1996, p. 206.

14. Ma Guojun, *Zhonghua chuantong youxi daquan* (The Big Traditional Chinese Game Collection), Beijing, Nongcun duwu chubanshe, 1990, p. 1.

15. Game of tablets is here used for the game of bo or liubo which was played with dice and resembled backgammon, as is shown by a few illustrations from the Han dynasty. Liubo is contemporaneous with weiqi, though some claim that it dates back to the Shang dynasty because of a resemblance between the game of liubo with its bronze mirrors called TLV (because of the motifs in the form of T, L and V with which they are decorated) which dates back to the Shang. Yi is a character which identified board games in ancient China. however, in the Chinese texts consulted during this research, it is found to refer most often to weiqi, particularly in the interpretation of these words of Confucius. It is also the first character in the name Yiqiu, who was certainly the most famous player in classical China.

16. Séraphin Couvreur (Trad.), *The Four Books Of Confucius* - which are his spiritual legacy and are titled: *La Grande étude*; *L'Invariable milieu*; *Les Entretiens*; *le Meng Tzeu* (The Great Study, The Unchanging Middle, The Conversations, the Meng Tzeu), Paris, Jean de Bonnot, 1981, p. 501.

17. This critical approach has its counterpart in Plato, a century earlier, as this story shows: "Plato one day reproached a man who was playing dice. The man replied that he was getting carried away over very little, and Plato said to him: "But the habit of playing it is not very little". see DUFLO, Colas, *Le jeu. De Pascal à Schiller* (The Game, From Pascal to Schiller) Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, p. 14.

18. Mengzi, Lau [Trans.], 1979, p. 232 -Book IV-A.

19. Guoqing Yang, " *Lun weiqi yu Zhongguo gudai sixiang wenhua liupai* " (Remarks on weiqi and the schools of thought in ancient China), in *Tiyu Wenshi*, n° 6, 1990, p. 57.

20. Shi lists the following emperors as having been notorious players: " ...Liu Bang (Qin), Cao Cao and Cao Pi (Han), Jin Wu di (Jin), Song Wu Di and Song Ming di (Song), Qi Gao di (Qi), Liang Wu di (Liang), Tang Xuanzong and Tang Xizong " (Tang). The most famous among them for his mastery of the game remains the

Emperor Tang Taizong [Li Shimin] (SHI Liangzhao, Pingsheng juying-Zhongguo boyi wenhua (Sound of the Board, Reflection of a Game - Chess Culture in China), Shanghai, Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991, p. 174.

21. See Sports and Games in Ancient China, 1986, p. 68. to the ancient Chinese, the Earth was a closed square space divided into four sections, a center and nine directions (or winds). This is exactly what one obtains if one divides the board horizontally and vertically, passing through the points called mu (eye), the center being named tianyuan (sky-origins). The mythical Emperor Yao "traveled over and measured the nine Mountains, the nine Rivers, and the nine Marshes, arranging the soil which was at last able to be cultivated, that is to say which was divided into fields, which were square and divided into nine squares: in short, we are told Yu divided the world into nine regions"(Marcel Granet, La civilization chinoise, Paris, Albin Michel, 1988, p. 146) According to Reysset, one can also see a correspondence between the number of intersections and of stones to be played and the number of days in the Chinese religious calendar. This counts 360 days, and "the two numbers are all the more disturbingly close because the number 1 "does not count" to the Chinese since it is the center, the void, the origin, neither yin nor yang".(Op. cit., p. 28).

22. Ma Zheng, " Tang Song liang dai de qidaizhao " ("Professional weiqi players in the Tang and Song dynasties"), in Weiqi, n° 3, 1986, p. 31.

23. See Pascale Coulette, Lectures chinoises de la prostitution, (Chinese interpretations of Prostitution) Doctoral Thesis presented at the Department of Anthropology, University of Montreal on the 21st of January. (forthcoming).

24. Shi, op. cit., p. 138 et ss.

25. Shen catalogues several dozen in his work on "the culture of weiqi". One finds in these poems, which are closely tied to weiqi, the themes of nature, the seasons, wine, twilight and the communion of friendship.

26. Wingfun Cheng, Hervé Collet (Trad.), Tu Fu, Dieux et diables pleurent (Tu fu, Gods and Devils Cry), Millemont, Moundarren, 1987, unpaginated.

27. Reysset, op. cit., p. 15.

28. Tukui Zhang, Jin Ping Mei qutan (Anecdotes on Jin Ping Mei), Beijing, Zhongguo luyou chubanshe, 1994, p. 6.

28. See also on this subject the preceding work by Zhang Tugui.

30. Herbert A. Giles, " Wei-chi, or the Chinese game of war ", in Temple Bar, England, Vol. 49, n° 194, 1877, p. 45.

31. There are also common precepts in the world of chess, the literary origin of which, if there is one, no one was able to tell us: "guanqi bu yu zhen junzi " or "The gentleman says not a word while watching a game", " luozi bu hui da zhangfu " ou " The true man does not retract (does not take back the stone once played) ". There is another expression which is typical of the game, qing bie zhi zhao, literally "Please do not indicate or make a sign". The spectators therefore participate in the ritual, but they are expected to be silent and respectful towards the players". (Xiao Fang, " Zhongguo minjian youxi yule de tezheng ji gongneng tanlun" ("Research into the characteristics and functions of Chinese popular games and amusements"), in Beijing shifan daxue xuebao, 1992, p. 55.

32. Zhang Yunqi, Weiqi de faxian (Discovering weiqi), Beijing, Internal document of the Chinese Weiqi Institute 1991, p. 2.

33. Lin, op. cit., p. 15.

34. Jacques Gernet, " Le changeant et l'immuable-Quelques réflexions à propos de la Chine "("The changing and the unchanging- some thoughts on China"), in Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, n° 100, December 1993, p. 29.

35. Yasunari Kawabata, Le maître ou le tournoi de go (The Master or The Go Tournament), Paris, Albin Michel, 1975, p. 142 et ss.

36. Caillois, op. cit., p. 778.

37. Yang , op. cit., 1990, p. 57

38. Victor Turner, " Variations in the Theme of Liminality ", in Secular Ritual, Amsterdam, Van Gorcum, 1977, p. 48.

39. Xu Jialiang, Zhongguo gudai qiyi (The Ancient Art of Chinese Chess), Beijing, Shangwu yinshuguan, 1991, p. 20.

40. Necessity to present identity papers and letter of introduction first to the guard and then to the authorities of the establishment.

41. A member of the CPC since 1923, Chen Yi has had a brilliant military and political career. He was mayor of Shanghai in the 1950s, and then Foreign Minister from 1958 to 1972. He was the first Director of the Chinese Association of Weiqi players and an annual competition has been named after him. He is said to have been an excellent player of the game.

42. The rules are in fact numerous; the weiqi associations of the

various countries have codified their own versions of the rules which were all originally based on the Chinese rules. Thus, in general, when one goes to play in Korea, one will adopt the rules of the Korean baduk Association. But among the very numerous tournaments which take place in the world and particularly in Asia, some have their own rules, such as the ING tournament, after the name of the Taiwanese billionaire Ing Chang-ki who has extensively subsidized go in his country. The variations are not sufficient to pose real problems of adaptation from one country to another and the players adapt from one tournament to another. On this subject visit the [BGA Website](#). I would like to express my thanks here to Jan van der Steen and to François Lorrain for their valuable information on this subject.

43. Zhang, 1991, op. cit., p. 1.

44. Reyssset, op. cit., p. 36.

45. Kawabata, op. cit., p. 104.

46. Renmin ribao (The People's Daily), March 26, 1996.

47. For a semester we attended this class, which credited in the student's degree course just like any other subject. Made up of a historical part of about ten hours (the "historical" character prevails however, as the games analyzed later are generally the "classic" games of the masters), the class is then given over to the basics of scoring, rules, concrete strategic problems, handicaps and to the detailed analysis of the various stages of a game. Exercises are given in class and explained on the board.

48. Zuo Dawen, in Beijing qingnian bao (Beijing Young People's Daily), March 30, 1995.

49. Simon Leys, La forêt en feu (The Burning Forest), Paris, Hermann, 1983. p. 13.

50. Roger Sue, " Contribution à une sociologie historique du loisir " ("Contribution to a historical sociology of leisure"), in Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie, Vol. XCI, 1991, p. 284.

51. Pierre Bourdieu, Un art moyen (An Average Art), Paris, Editions de minuit, 1965.

52. Etienne Balazs, La bureaucratie céleste-Recherches sur l'économie et la société de la Chine traditionnelle (The Celestial Bureaucracy Research On The Economy and Society of Traditional China), Paris, Gallimard, 1968, p. 301.

53. Richard C. Kraus, Pianos and Politics in China: Middle Class Ambitions and the Struggle Over Western Music, New York, Oxford

University Press, 1989, p. 20.